

Introduction

The Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, and Pony Express National Historic Trails extend from the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers to the Pacific Coast, a distance of about 2,000 miles. While the trails overlap for significant distances, they also follow separate routes for hundreds of miles. The California Trail includes numerous connecting trails and alternate routes that add thousands of miles to its cumulative length. Overall, the routes of the four trails total almost 14,000 miles and traverse the Central Lowlands, the Rocky Mountains, the Great Basin, the Cascades and the Sierra Nevada.

This “Affected Environment” section describes the trails from the Missouri River to the Pacific Coast for the Pony Express and California National Historic Trails. Descriptions of the Oregon and Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trails are available in their respective Comprehensive Management and Use Plans and have not been reprinted in this document.

This section also addresses trail resources. This plan regards the natural and cultural resources associated with the trails holistically. It stresses the importance of managing them as trail resources having both natural and cultural components.

For the purpose of this plan, seven distinct environmental settings have been identified along the route of the trails. The main physical features of these settings become the character-defining features that are usually the basis of cultural landscapes studies. The changes in these character-defining features, in this case the variations in physiography, vegetation, climate, and soils, allow a preliminary classification of trail resources, as they exist today, and a determination of their degree of integrity — that is, the extent to which the landscapes have

evolved since the emigrants moved across the land. The landscapes settings identified for this plan are as follows: the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers starting points, the Platte River, the Rocky Mountains and the Continental Divide, the Snake River–Columbia Plateau, the Cascades, the Great Basin, and the Sierra Nevada (see map 17). Because the majority of the routes emigrants used followed major river systems, these environmental settings center around the major water bodies that became essential to the survival of most emigrant parties. Brief descriptions of physiography, soils, climate, water resources, vegetation, and fauna are included for each landscape setting. These descriptions are based on the Description of the Ecoregions of the United States published by the Forest Service.

This section also includes a brief summary of ethnographic information pertinent to the large areas crossed by the trail. The extent and complexity of this topic requires a more systematic assessment of ethnographic resources along these trails. This will become an ongoing task for the Long Distance Trails Office.

A description of landownership and use is presented for the California and Pony Express Trails. This document recommends updating information on landownership and use for all four trails in the future.

Socioeconomic conditions vary from region to region and from state to state. Because of the length of the four trails, their administration and management can have potentially important social implications for the affected counties. Socioeconomic information that focuses primarily on population and income has been compiled on a statewide basis. In addition, population and per capita income have been identified for the 150 counties crossed by these trails.